

# NJ graduation rates: What's behind urban districts' remarkable improvement?



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## Educators in improving districts say they are paying more attention to data — and to each individual student.



Plainfield High School graduation rates have improved since 2012.(Photo: ~File)

ROSELLE – It was the first day of school for the 700 students of Abraham Clark High School.

But before they could walk between the Corinthian columns and through the steel doors, they were greeted by the beating sounds of marching band drums and the warm smiles and outstretched hands of adults most had never met.

Those men and women, dressed in their professional best, included elected officials, business and civil leaders — and their principal, Rashon Mickens, who turned out in his bright red graduation cap and gown.

It's the sort of display that teenagers in this mostly minority working-class community might call — in schools Superintendent Kevin R. West's word — "corny." But West says "rolling out the red carpet" on the first day of school lets the students know that their community cares about their education.

It's just one example of how this high school combines standard evaluation and data monitoring with less orthodox methods. Their toolbox includes software that tracks exactly how each and every student is performing, alerting educators when any student becomes a failure risk so that the school can intervene with tutoring or a "credit recovery" program that allows students

to pass courses through online sessions. And then there's also boys-only and girls-only weekend sleepovers in the school building with adult mentors who lead motivational seminars.

Tying it all together is the development what West and Mickens call a “culture of achievement.”

“Teachers had a mindset that kids can’t do this,” said West, who became superintendent in 2011. “So we had to get them out the mindset of saying what the kids can’t and let’s move them from where they are to where they need to be.”

The district’s efforts appear to be paying off.

Last year, Abraham Clark graduated 90.2 percent of its students, besting the state average of 89.7. The rate was almost a 12 point increase from the previous year and a 16 point increase from 2012.

### **The numbers**

It's not just Roselle. Graduation rates have been improving steadily statewide.

**Graduation rates in New Jersey's poorest districts: 2015 vs. 2012**

County	District	2015 rate	Change
ATLANTIC	PLEASANTVILLE	81.36%	14.44
BERGEN	GARFIELD	83.83%	4.47
BURLINGTON	PEMBERTON	89.72%	6.05
CAMDEN	CAMDEN CITY	63.57%	14.3
CAMDEN	GLOUCESTER CITY	82.47%	-4.15
CUMBERLAND	BRIDGETON	76.33%	9.08
CUMBERLAND	MILLVILLE	90.22%	8.65
CUMBERLAND	VINELAND	75.89%	7.16
ESSEX	EAST ORANGE	75.58%	4.79
ESSEX	IRVINGTON	70.33%	7.86
ESSEX	NEWARK	69.59%	0.87
ESSEX	ORANGE TOWNSHIP	83.23%	16.56
HUDSON	HARRISON	91.71%	-0.99
HUDSON	HOBOKEN	83.33%	8.8
HUDSON	JERSEY CITY	73.68%	6.34
HUDSON	UNION CITY	87.47%	4.6
HUDSON	WEST NEW YORK	84.70%	8.56
MERCER	TRENTON	68.63%	20.19
MIDDLESEX	NEW BRUNSWICK	68.50%	9.93
MIDDLESEX	PERTH AMBOY	73.38%	0.51
MONMOUTH	ASBURY PARK	66.04%	17.02
MONMOUTH	KEANSBURG	87.76%	9.69
MONMOUTH	LONG BRANCH	92.19%	6.71
MONMOUTH	NEPTUNE TOWNSHIP	80.73%	4.29
PASSAIC	PASSAIC CITY	78.31%	17.51
PASSAIC	PATERSON	78.26%	11.87
SALEM	SALEM CITY	77.33%	1.64
UNION	ELIZABETH	78.15%	12.45
UNION	PLAINFIELD	80.49%	8.51
WARREN	PHILLIPSBURG	87.88%	0.1

Source: NJ Dept. of Education/MyCentralJersey

Notably, the upward trend hasn't escaped the state's most economically disadvantaged districts, which have long struggled with lagging test scores and high drop-out rates.

Since 2012, the average graduation rate climbed by 8 points to 79.4 percent among the state's 30 poorest school districts — formerly known as “Abbott districts” after the state Supreme Court cases that mandated increased state funding for their school budgets. More than half of all state aid for education goes to these districts.

Among these districts, New Brunswick High School's graduation rate improved since 2012 by almost 10 points, to 68.5 percent. Asbury Park improved by 17 points, to 66 percent. And Trenton's 68.6 percent rate last year, while still low, represented a 20 point improvement over four years.

Plainfield High School's graduation rate peaked in 2014 at 90.7. Last year the rate dropped to 80.5, but was still higher 6.6 points higher than 2012.

Plainfield Academy for the Arts and Advanced Studies, a separate, smaller public high school with a competitive admissions process and an enrollment of just over 370, graduated 95.8 percent of its students last year. Its first graduation class in 2014 had a 91.7 percent rate.

Plainfield schools Superintendent Anna Bellin-Pyles said the district uses the same tools available to other districts, including credit recovery courses and developing an academic "vision" with each student in the ninth grade.

"In addition, we count on the support of several community and faith-based organizations that provide great support to our students," Bellin-Pyles said.

Every student gets

Perth Amboy Assistant Superintendent Vivian Rodriguez

Perth Amboy Assistant Superintendent Vivian Rodriguez says she met with every high school student who was in danger of failing. (Photo: ~File)

Perth Amboy, like Roselle, attributes its improvement to efforts that target failing students individually.

The city's high school barely graduated more than half of its students in 2014 and 2013. But last year, more than 73 percent of students graduated, a dramatic 14 point improvement in a single year.

Assistant Superintendent Vivian Rodriguez said bilingual and special education graduates — students who typically present greater challenges for educators — were greatly responsible for the school's improved rate last year.

Bilingual students with limited English, who've been in the country for three years or less, saw their graduation rates climb almost 16 points to 65.4 percent. The special education rate climbed by 22 points to 72.9 percent.

Rodriguez, who served as interim superintendent in 2014, said the district targeted failing students in these subgroups with Saturday and before- and after-school tutoring.

Every student has mentor

Unlike Perth Amboy, Roselle is not a former Abbott district but shares some of the same challenges as those districts. About 70 percent of the student body is black, while another 27 percent is Hispanic. Almost 1 in 10 students don't speak English proficiently, while 3 out of 5 students come from economically disadvantaged households, a subgroup that traditionally has underperformed on the standardized tests that are among the graduation requirements.

Mickens, who grew up in public housing in the Port of Elizabeth, and West, who graduated from Newark's Barringer High School, which he described as "do or die," say they understand their students' struggles. Both are black.

"Our upbringing was very similar to our students in our building: single-parent homes, growing up poor with not a lot," Mickens says. "But these students have it much better than we had, so we say to them, 'If we can make it and be successful then there's no excuse for you.' We always use ourselves as examples."

Every student can make it

From that data, district officials noticed that boys were underperforming compared to girls, so much so that the lower graduation rates could be attributed to male students who had failed or dropped out.

"Social media and the hip-hop generation have played a role in pulling our guys down in terms of what their educational expectations are," West said. "It's up to schools to say there's a problem here and tell the boys that we are having more African-American and Latino males going to prison than we are graduating college."

Mickens believes that the mentoring programs, including the involvement of Phi Beta Sigma, an African-American fraternity and service organization to which he and Mickens belong, in the annual weekend school sleep-over, help change the students' attitudes.

"That's what I feel we have to pour into our kids," he said. "Be an inspiration to them, be a role model to them, lead by example."

Graduation rates among boys improved last year, helping to buoy the school's overall rate, the administrators said.